

A QUIET SEA
RMS TITANIC



GAMBLERS

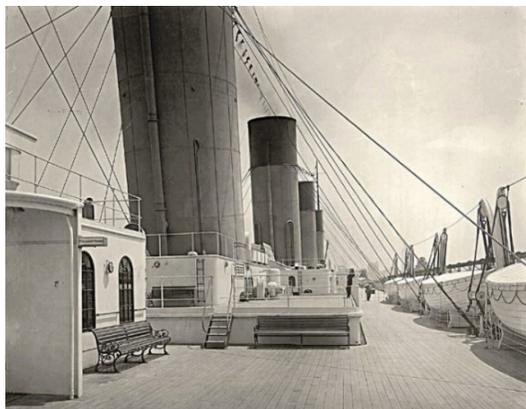
TITANIC: GAMBLERS

INTRODUCTION

Warning posted by White Star:

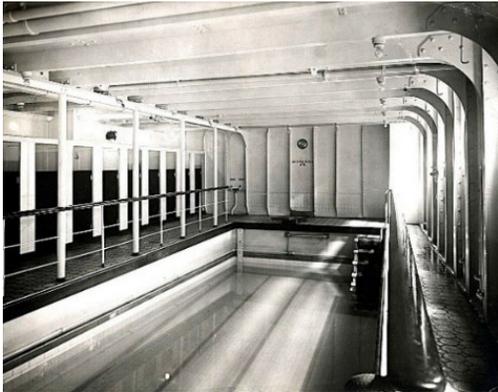
“The attention of the Managers has been called to the fact that certain persons, believed to be Professional Gamblers, are in the habit of travelling to and fro in Atlantic Steamships. In bringing this to the knowledge of Travelers the Managers, while not wishing in the slightest degree to interfere with the freedom of action of Patrons of the White Star Line, desire to invite their assistance in discouraging Games of Chance, as being likely to afford these individuals special opportunities for taking unfair advantage of others.”

A transatlantic crossing could be challenging and tedious. Passengers inflicted with the dreaded mal de mer sought ways to ride out the tantrums of the Atlantic, usually under a steamer blanket in a deck chair. To ease passengers' boredom and provide some distractions, steamship companies devised various games, the most venerable being shuffleboard, known in the 15th century as shoveboard and remastered for shipboard fun in the 1840s. Another distraction was to guess the ship's daily run in miles. Pre-selected numbers were auctioned to passengers the evening before the contest. When the ship's noon whistle sounded, participants would find their way to the designated public room to get the results. The ship's daily run was jotted down by the officer on watch and dispatched by messenger to the assembled contestants. The lucky winner would collect his or her reward, while sore losers could claim the contest was rigged, despite the fact that the officers were supposed to be impartial. The all-time winner, whose feat was never equaled, was an American woman who won 5 days in a row. But even this benign pastime wasn't immune to would-be cheaters, who quietly approached officers and crew for insider information. The anchor pool was another betting game; whoever guessed the time of arrival to the destination's lightship received a payoff. The daily run and anchor pools were especially popular on the fastest and most premier liners (as was miniature golf). Sedate activities, like chess matches and backgammon, were also organized to keep passengers occupied. Betting on bridge hands in the public rooms was allowed, but the approved amount was a penny a point, not one cent more. Stewards kept an eye on the card players to ensure that relations remained cordial. Alcohol flowed freely, and those too tipsy to find their way to their cabin could get an escort from a friendly steward. Small libraries for those who just wanted to read were available in first- and second-class lounges. Deck races about the open, spacious decks or workout routines with the gym instructor could be pursued by those athletically inclined.



RMS Olympic spacious boat deck starboard view forward
Credit: Wikimedia

Improving affluent passengers' shipboard experience was uppermost in the minds of steamship owners. Ever in the lead with passenger amenities, White Star's Adriatic of 1906 had the first swimming pool (called a plunge bath, with separate hours for men and women), a Turkish bath and gymnasium. Some credit Cunard's 1910 Franconia as the first liner with a gymnasium. RMS Olympic, Titanic's sister, had the first squash racket court.



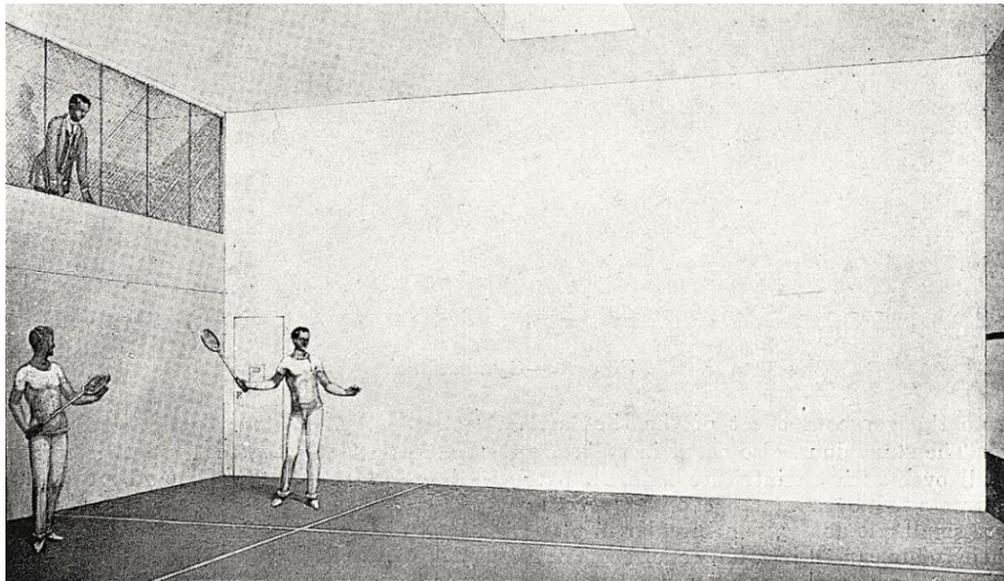
Swimming bath (Olympic)
Credit: Wikipedia Commons



Turkish bath (Titanic)
Credit: Wikipedia



Gymnasium (Titanic)
Credit: Wikipedia



RMS Olympic squash racket court (concept drawing)
Credit: Wikipedia

THE SET-UP

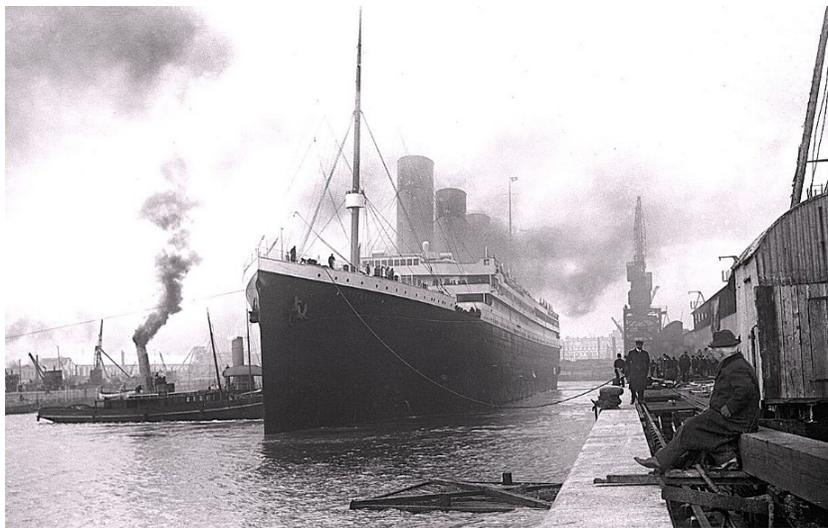
Those seeking riskier adventures shunned White Star's warning. Well-heeled gentlemen, eager to win at cards on a maiden voyage, were the perfect marks for prowling boatmen, as gamblers on liners were called. Boatmen preferred the fastest ships, as more crossings offered more opportunities. Having perfected a refined appearance, grifters, working singly or with confederates, seduced their victims into joining games or, when the signals were right, let the mark invite them to theirs. It took smooth talk, time and planning to earn the trust of the quarry so the sharpers could put their ambidextrous card skills to good use.

The boat train, an intrinsic part of the transatlantic experience, provided a good place for gamblers to set the trap for their victims, who they referred to as "eggs" waiting to be "hatched." One such train originated about 80 miles northeast of Southampton at Waterloo Station in London. Opened in 1848 by the London and South Western Railway, it was the gathering point for passengers bound for the Southampton Ocean Terminal, where they would board the big liners.



Waterloo Station, boat train to Southampton
Credit: Father Browne collection

Two trains carried passengers to Titanic's berth 44 for her April 10 noon departure. The first train, carrying Second- and Third-Class passengers, left the station about 7:30 am. The early departure time was to allow for a final medical screening. First-Class passengers had their own train, which departed more than 2 hours later, at 9:45 am. It was fitted with roomy Pullman cars well equipped with amenities and a separate restaurant car. About 1,000 passengers made the trip to Titanic by train.



Titanic departing berth 44
Credit: Wikipedia

The boat train was the ideal venue for boatmen to troll for a naïve mark. It gave gamblers over 2 hours to initiate a dialogue. Hospitable and friendly, a gambler or his accomplice might suggest meeting on board ship and shyly invite the mark to his cabin. (Card sharps preferred private locations to fleece their prey.) To set the hook, the boatmen might get the mark to look him up. One strategy was to lift the victim's wallet as the train approached the station or as soon as the group was on board ship. Panicked, the mark would inquire at the crowded purser's office. Much to his relief, he was presented with his wallet, contents intact, and informed that another passenger had found it. Ecstatic, and wanting to reward the good deed, the mark sought out the proper cabin. Entering this spider's web, the victim offered a monetary reward for his wallet. The good Samaritan would feign surprise, refuse the money but politely ask the mark if he would like to join a friendly bridge game. Settling in with his newfound friends in an elegant cabin, the mark was dealt his cards, winning most of the hands played; ahead lay a week at sea to get better acquainted.



RMS Olympic first-class cabin sitting room
Credit: Flickr

A jovial, chummy spirit prevailed. The mark's fellow players exhibited surprise at his skill and luck. The game wound down when the ship pulled in and the mark collected his winnings. Once ashore, the group headed for the train station and "coincidentally" boarded the mark's train. Biding their time, with a quick exit at the station a must, the gamblers joked about their losses and asked for one more chance before arriving at their destination. As the train got nearer the station, the gamblers piqued the mark's interest by offering a quick and simple game requiring only two or three cards; Acey-Ducey, In-Between or Red Dog fit the bill. Culling the cards with sleight-of-hand dealing would put an arranged hand at the bottom of the stack. Then the coup de grace: magically, a winning hand appeared, and the operators won back far more than their money. If the mark was unable to pay in cash, he could pay by check. Once ashore, the gamblers made a bee line to the nearest bank to cash in their loot. Caught in these unenviable positions, most marks, stunned by what happened, would not pursue it further. Teams of gamblers (including a father/daughter duo) would work the intended prey on countless Atlantic crossings.



Father/daughter swindlers (Charles Coburn & Barbara Stanwyck) as depicted in the 1941 film *The Lady Eve* (Paramount Pictures) Credit: Wikimedia Commons

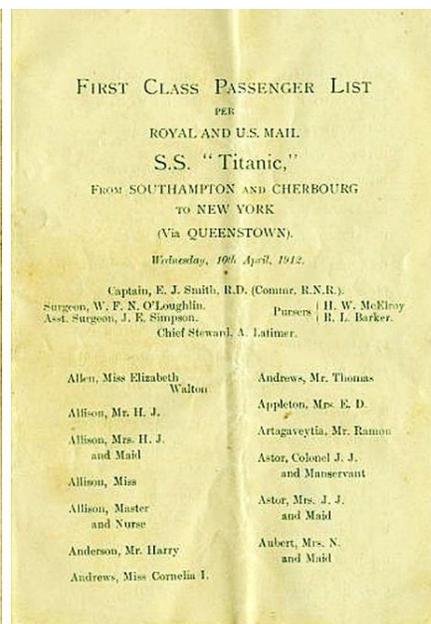
Trains weren't the only place to fleece the mark. When disembarking the liner, the boatman would arrange to have his accomplices bring a car to the dock and offer his new friend a ride. Faking a breakdown, the group would retreat to a hotel to spend the night. The inevitable card game got going followed by the inevitable loss, leaving the mark stranded.

Of course, sharpening didn't only go in one direction. Some travelers, also expert card dealers, would present themselves as dullards, ready to be picked clean. They would pay off their losses partly in cash, partly by check. Thinking they had put one over on a rube, the swindlers were the ones taken for a ride when the check bounced. Some victims, stung by their foolishness, complained to the steamship company, but to no avail. Captains, alerted to a shill, would make a point of cornering the scoundrel. Captain Rostron, of Carpathia fame, made a study of knowing the cards in the winning hand that cleaned out the mark. Sloppy repetition in dealing left the sharpeners open to discovery. Rattling off the cards to the wounded victim, Rostron would confront the cheaters and compel them to return their dishonest profits or be arrested. Another captain made a strong impression by interrogating suspects with a handgun lying ominously on his table.

The boatman's toolbox might include a comely young woman to lure the fish to the hook, baited with the hint of a late-night dalliance after the cards were put away. Infidelity presented an opportunity to victimize businessmen traveling without their wives and on the hunt for a mid-ocean fling. A tried-and-true method involved a beautiful woman, posing as the frustrated wife of an alcoholic gambling addict, seeking out a shoulder to cry on. Easily seduced, the would-be Casanova would offer comfort to the beleaguered wife, and they'd withdraw to her sumptuous cabin, where she would "lock" the door. While entangled in the ardor of passion, the outraged "husband" would burst in waving a pistol, accusing the unfaithful "wife" of cheating. Cornered in this unsavory and terrifying situation, the mark was shaken down; hand over your money or we tell your wife. So ensnared, the victim was happy to pay.

In the days before mass media, the wealthy lifestyle provided glamor and entertainment for the public. The British upper class was a tight-knit group that was world famous, as were American tycoons such as J.P. Morgan, who was to have made Titanic's maiden voyage but cancelled. For the resourceful gambler on the hunt, learning the movements of the wealthy was easy from newspapers and the social registers; Titanic's maiden voyage was ideal.

Gamblers employed aliases, like "Doc Owen" and "One Armed Mac," or used modified surnames to throw the law and watchful companies off the trail. Their wily profession didn't fool everyone. Vigilant stewards who recognized a particular gambler would sometimes ask, "Who are you on this trip?" One confidence man disguised himself as a cleric and employed a meek, unthreatening demeanor to trap his marks. More often than not, the enterprising sharper would offer a bribe to stewards for their silence. Nevertheless, the gullible fell for the ruse, and the games went on; some individuals lost more than \$60,000, and these were 1912 dollars. Captain Bertram Hays, who later commanded RMS Olympic, wrote: "It has always puzzled me why passengers, who are usually men of a certain amount of common sense, allow themselves to be fleeced by the professional gamblers who frequently cross in the larger passenger ships." The gamblers did their homework and would refer to the First Class passenger list for likely marks.



First Class passenger list
Credit: Independence Seaport Museum

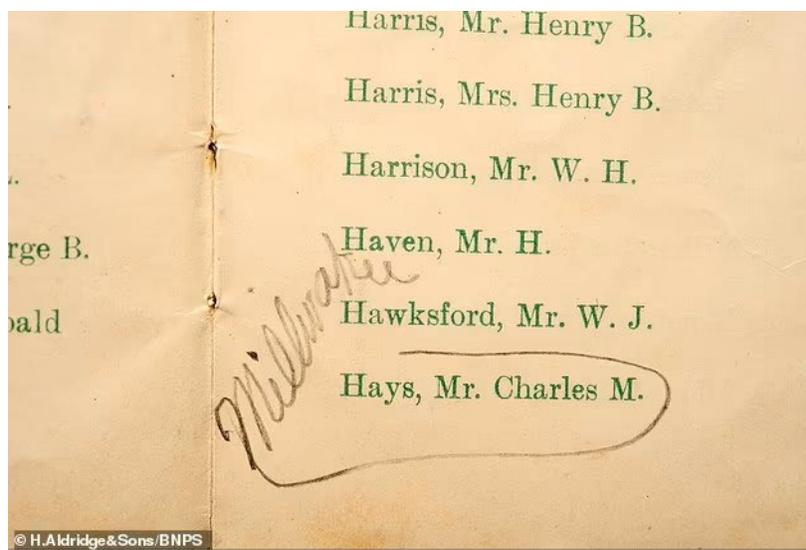
THE PLAYERS

There were three known gamblers on Titanic: George Andrew Brereton, Harry Haven Homer and Charles Hallace Romaine. A list of First Class passengers who survived records them under their aliases as George Brayton, H. Haven and C. Rolmane, respectively.



George Andrew Brereton (1874-1942)
Credit: Daily Mail

George Brereton was born in 1874 to an Irish farmer (Daniel Brereton, 1838?-1920) and Bavarian mother (Mary Rohe, 1844-1915) who immigrated to America around 1858. George and his five siblings spent their youth in Madelia, Minnesota, moving to Minneapolis with their parents in 1895. George struck out on his own a few years later. He held numerous jobs, from waiter to real estate agent and car salesman. He may have begun his gambling career around 1910. Sporting a variety of names, such as "Boy" Bradley, Ralph Bradley, he used his real name only once. Brereton traveled aboard RMS Olympic and the German liner Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse in 1911, searching First Class passenger lists for potential targets. Staking out marks aboard RMS Lusitania, he arrived in New York in March 1912, only to immediately depart for England. The reason for his precipitous departure is unknown. He may have been on the run or was considering Titanic as his next big chance. As George A. Brayton, he boarded the new liner on April 10 for her maiden voyage. Once on board, he set his sights on Charles Melville Hays, president of the Grand Trunk Railway*.



Brereton passenger list
Credit: Daily Mail/H. Aldridge & Sons

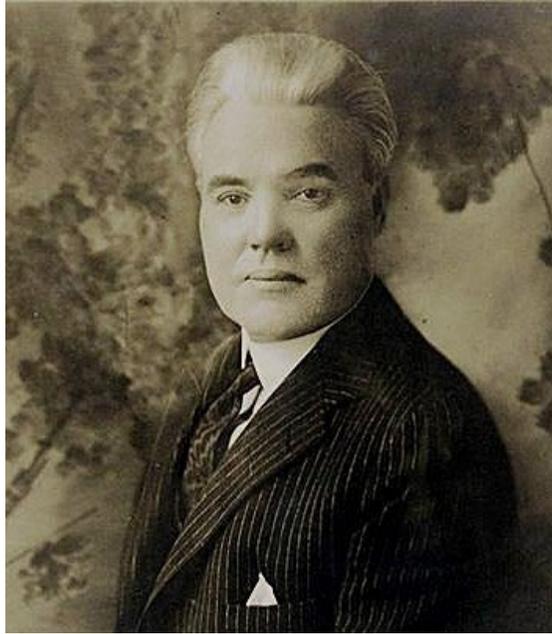
THE PARTNERS



Harry Haven Homer (1871-1939)
Credit: Unknown

Harry "Kid" Homer, a native of Henry, Indiana was born in 1871. His parents were physician Richard Homer (or H. A. Homer, 1819-1902) and Elizabeth Jackson (1829-1888). Homer's father emigrated from England; his mother was born in Ohio. Homer's large family included 10 siblings. He married Delia Atwater (b. 1875) in 1893, and little is known other than that the couple had a daughter in 1904. Homer's shady career racked up a catalog of misdemeanors: a charge of reasonable suspicion (alias, Harry Dillon) in Buffalo, NY, where the police chased him out of town; grand larceny, in Cleveland; loitering, in Cincinnati; and other offenses in Hot Springs, Arkansas and many other locales. Surveilled by detectives, he was periodically dragged into court. Ever the confidence man, Homer was arrested for wiretapping and by 1906 was so active that he was listed in the US album of criminals. A large man, his appearance was conspicuous, and when identified he was periodically locked up. During this time, New Orleans embarked on an anti-gambling crusade to clean up the city, and Homer had the honor of being listed in the county rogue's gallery. He was a known pickpocket, and when passing through New Orleans with his partner James Wright was spotted and questioned. The two men said they were going in different

directions, Wright to Cuba, Homer to Texas, where he truthfully said he was getting a legitimate job for a land company. His new employer sent him to Europe and Egypt. Homer eventually ended up in Cherbourg, France where he boarded Titanic on the evening of April 10. He purchased his ticket as E. or H. Haven.



Charles Hallace Romaine (1866-1922)
Credit: Facebook

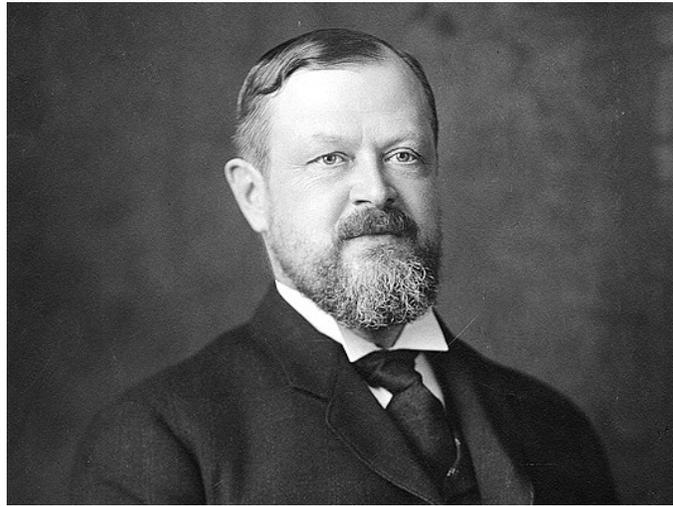
Tall, suave, boisterous and dapper, Charles Romaine's upper-class demeanor was an asset to hooking wealthy marks. He was the youngest son of William Romine/Romaine** (1825-1867) and Julia Lyman (1826-1911). The couple had 12 children and lived in Georgetown, Kentucky. When just a year old, Charles's father passed away. His mother then married Joshua Secrist/Seacrist,** and Charles was renamed Harrison Secrist. By the age of 14, Charles was living in Oliver, Ohio and secured work as a laborer. When he turned 26, his family moved to Anderson, Indiana where he was lucky enough to land a job as assistant manager of the Hotel Doxey and Bijou Theater, which catered to wealthy people. While in this stable environment, Charles married Eileen B. Doll (b. 1874) in 1895. The childless couple briefly stayed in Anderson, moving to New York City later that year. When Romaine morphed from hotel manager to confidence man is unknown. But confidence men roamed hotels as well as ocean liners and working at the Doxey may have introduced Romaine to the sharper lifestyle. He began making regular trips across the Atlantic and had a dignified position as a stockbroker in 1910, burnishing his upstanding image.



Hotel Doxey & Bijou Theater
Credit: Anderson Downtown Neighbors Association

By this time, Romaine worked under several aliases (Rolmane, Romacue, Romine) to further his new profession as a sharper. The move to New York coincided with his gambling career aboard prestigious ships like Adriatic, La Provence and Lusitania. In 1912, Romaine, this time as C. Rolmane, boarded Titanic in Southampton with Charles Brereton. The two had joined forces and looked forward to a lucrative trip.

THE IDEAL MARK



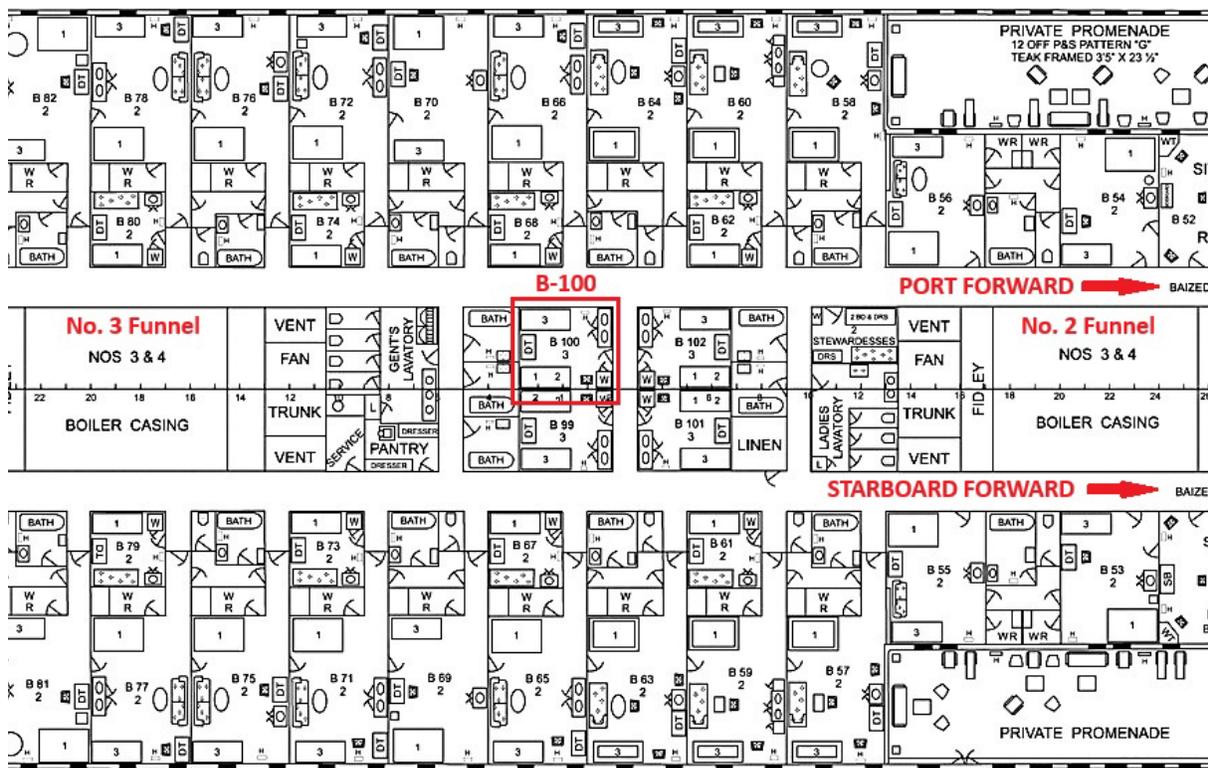
Charles Melville Hays (1856-1912)
Credit: Wikipedia

One of the most affluent people on board Titanic was Charles Melville Hays, a native of Rock Island, Illinois who had spent his youth in St. Louis, Missouri. Ambitious for success, Hays had focused his energy on the railroad business, starting out as a clerk when he was 17 and eventually rising to be General Manager of the Wabash, St. Louis and Pacific Railway at age 39. Hays wed Clara Gregg (1859-1955) in 1881, and the couple had four daughters.

Several small railway companies served the northeastern United States, while Canada's Grand Trunk Railway provided service across the Canadian provinces and into the United States. But the Canadian line was in financial trouble, and in 1896, J. P. Morgan stepped in. He chose Hays to be the new president and apply his knowledge of America's railway companies to the Canadian system. Hays started by making the Grand Trunk more competitive and expanding service. He garnered many honors as a railroad consultant, including the Order of the Rising Sun from the Emperor of Japan. This added to his luster as a top executive. Blessed by large loans and government largesse, Hays improved the company's infrastructure and rolling stock and was able to avoid bankruptcy. But he squeezed the railroad's workers' wages, and they eventually struck in 1910. Ever seeking loans for the Grand Trunk, Hays traveled to London in 1912 with his wife, daughter Orian, her husband and Mr. Vivian Payne, the family secretary. However, the family had to return to the United States on short notice, because their daughter Louise was having a difficult pregnancy. Returning on Titanic would be the fastest way to get back, attend the opening of the new Hotel Laurier and continue his railway expansion. Hays knew and met with J. Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line, on board Titanic to discuss related business deals.

HEDGING THEIR BETS

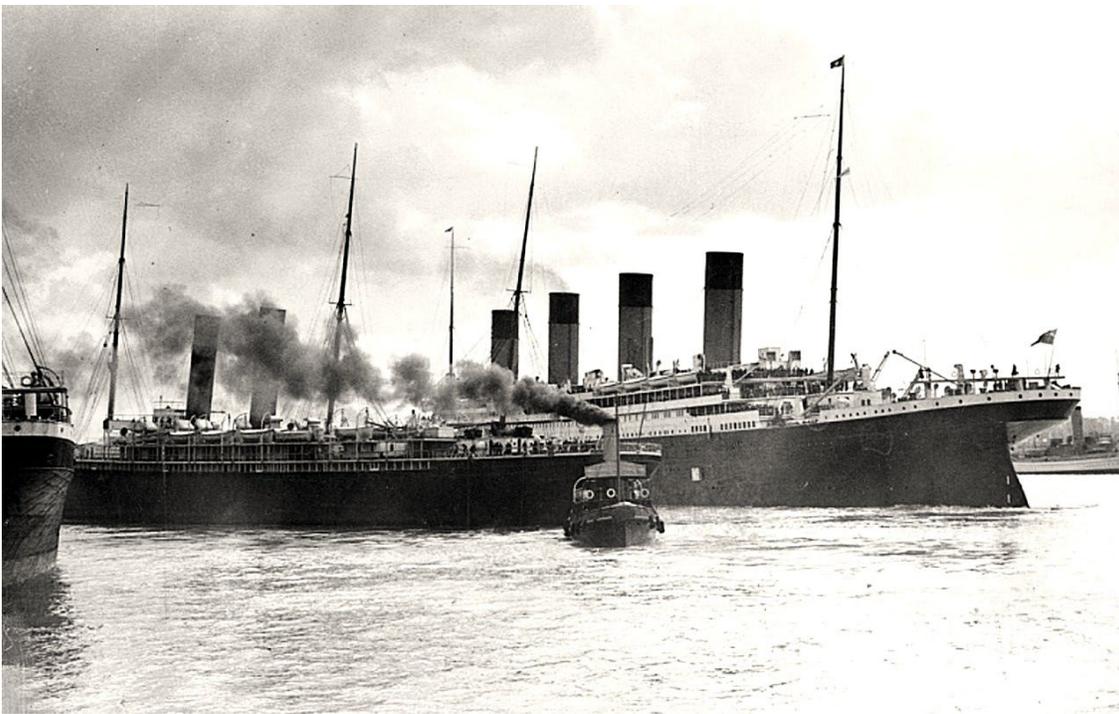
With passenger list in hand, George Brereton boarded Titanic and headed to cabin B100, located between the second and third funnels on B deck about midships.



Charles Brereton's First Class B-100 cabin in red
 Credit: Titanic deck plans

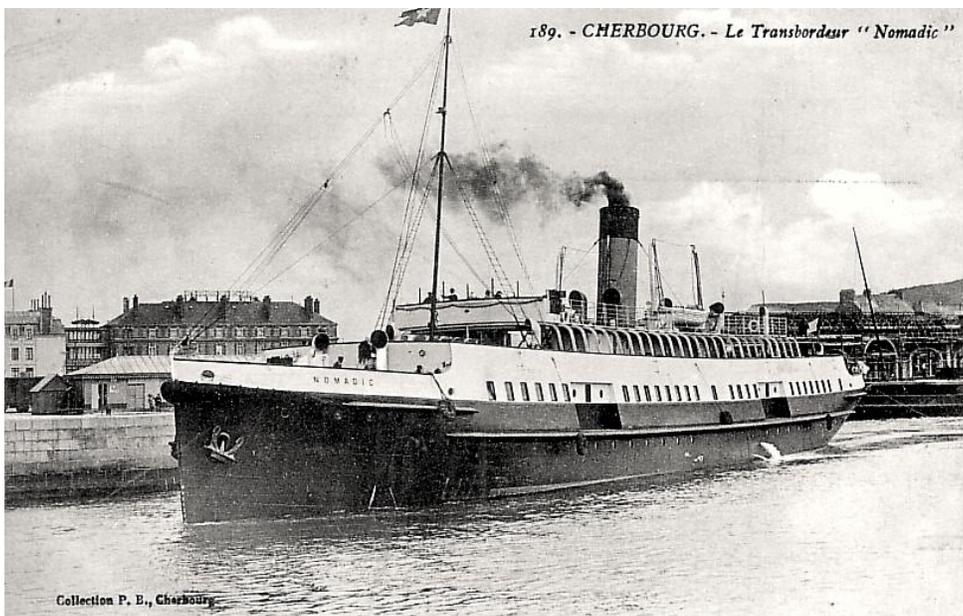
Ticket numbers for Homer, Brereton and Romaine were 111426, 111427 and 111428, respectively. (Cabin numbers for Homer and Romaine are not known.) Reserving a First Class cabin was essential to provide some credibility to their rank as anything other than confidence men. The first step was for the three sharpers to wire an accomplice in New York to arrange for taxi cabs to meet them, presumably to make a quick exit from White Star's Pier 59. The second step was to ingratiate themselves with the wealthy passengers they picked to rob.

With tugs easing her away from her berth, Titanic, working slowly ahead, passed the Holder Line's SS Beacon Grange and came upon the American Line's SS New York and White Star's RMS Oceanic tied up alongside each other toward the end of the long wharf. Titanic was making a brisk 6 knots when passing the SS New York and preparing to start her turn to port to shape up for the outbound channel and sea. New York, berthed outboard of Oceanic, bore the brunt of the suction from Titanic's passing bulk, and her stern lines parted with sharp reports. With New York's stern now released and drawn toward Titanic, Captain Smith and Pilot George Bowyer were quick to act. They stopped and reversed Titanic's engines and partially lowered the starboard anchor as a precaution, while the tug Vulcan shifted aft, laid out lines to New York and got her stern under control. Captain Charles Gale of Vulcan later commented, *"Someone sang out to me to get up and push the New York back, but such a thing was impossible. Had I got between the two ships we would almost certainly have been jammed. Instead, I turned the Vulcan round and got a wire rope on the port quarter of the New York. Unfortunately, that rope parted, but our men immediately got a second wire on board, and we got hold of New York when she was within four feet of Titanic. Our movements were all the more trying because the broken mooring ropes from the New York were lying in the water, and we stood a good chance of fouling our propeller. Every rope on the New York snapped, the stern lines being the first to go."* The close shave likely raised the two gamblers' concern that their trip might be over before it began.



New York (behind tug smoke) released from Oceanic (left) due to Titanic's propellers.
 Credit: Wikimedia Commons

But their luck held. Titanic was untouched and proceeded down Southampton water, bound to Cherbourg, where she would anchor at the harbor roadstead that evening about 6:30, there being no berth large enough to accommodate her. Met by the White Star passenger tender Nomadic, 24 First and Second Class passengers disembarked, having only made the Channel crossing from Southampton. One hundred seventy-two First and Second Class passengers, including the grifter Harry "Kid" Homer, boarded Titanic. A further 103 Third Class passengers boarded from White Star's second tender, Traffic. Choppy conditions prevailed and transferring from tenders to the big ship took care. Nomadic's crew steadied the gangway between the two vessels, helping the passengers make the transfer. Even so, one passenger suffered a sprained ankle. The tenders also delivered some final stores, meat, wine and bottled mineral water. With all aboard, Titanic hove up her anchor and got underway from Cherbourg a little after 8 pm for the overnight leg to Queenstown (now Cobh). Passengers and crew bid Titanic good voyage, calling, "See you in 2 weeks."



White Star tender SS Nomadic at Cherbourg 1911 **
 Credit: Unknown (Wikimedia Commons)

Arriving in Queenstown and anchoring at 11:30 am, Titanic was greeted by two tenders and small sailing vessels carrying local vendors selling clothing, lace, and other goods. She received about 120 steerage passengers and took aboard over 1,350 bags of mail. Sounding her steam whistles, Titanic was off again at 1:30 on the afternoon of April 11, bound for New York. She had on board about 1,300 passengers, half her full capacity, plus 900 crew (minus a fireman who had taken the opportunity to desert).

As Titanic hove up her anchor and exchanged farewell whistles with Queenstown, the passengers took in their new surroundings and looked up fellow travelers. Aft, on the quarterdeck, a piper unpacked his traditional uilleann pipes. Third Class Irish passenger Eugene Daly played the sorrowful “Erin’s Lament” for his fellow steerage passengers as Titanic turned her bow to the sea. For many, it was to be their last view of land.

With the trip underway, it was time for the sharpers, nattily dressed, to ferret out their victims. The reception room, lounge and restaurant all provided opportunities to start up a conversation leading to an invitation to play cards. But the public room of choice for card games was the First Class smoking room. Decorated in the manner of an 18th-century Georgian-style home, the space was paneled with carved mahogany and inlaid mother-of-pearl. A large fireplace was at the aft end of the room and surmounted by a Norman Wilkerson painting, “Entrance to Plymouth Harbor.” Lighting was cleverly diffused through painted windows, illuminating the room in a soft glow that introduced a degree of cozy intimacy. It was an ideal spot for important men to gather, discuss business and play cards.



RMS Olympic First Class smoking room
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The first day or two passed with the sharpers forging relationships, cultivating card games or joining one by invitation. They coordinated their tactics to scout out susceptible individuals and lure marks to card games, keeping in sight of one another. Depending on the number of potential marks, they would start their own game, enticing others to join them. The smoking room bar was a good place to start, all the better if the mark had had a few. Card games weren’t reserved solely for after dinner; passengers also played cards after lunch. The Café Parisian, a replica of a French

sidewalk restaurant, was a popular spot for the younger people on board. But this environment wasn't conducive to setting up a mark, as gambling took a back seat to friendly banter and casual socializing.

By Saturday, the third day of the crossing, the gamblers would have established themselves with affluent passengers, impressing them with their charm and demeanor. Theatrical producer Henry B. Harris, returning from London with his wife Renee, knew his way around a card table and joined a poker game that included one of the sharpers, possibly George Brereton. As the game went on, Harris noted the sequence of winning or perhaps detected a slip-up with the grifter's sleight of hand. Whatever raised his suspicions, he cut the card game short, and the group dispersed. Although "the cat was out of the bag," it was considered unseemly to reveal the gambler's identity to anyone other than the immediate group. The easiest way to protect legitimate players from the cheat was to keep their eight-seat table fully occupied, so Harris asked Renee to join the game. "It turned out I was called to be the eighth 'man'." When her husband pointed out the gambler, she was struck by how virtuous he looked, "like a minister." Licking his wounds, the con artist had to start over again. But as the gambler's attempts to get into another game fell short, another passenger saw his demeanor take on a cynical and menacing smile.



Henry B. Harris (1866-1912)
Credit: Washington Times

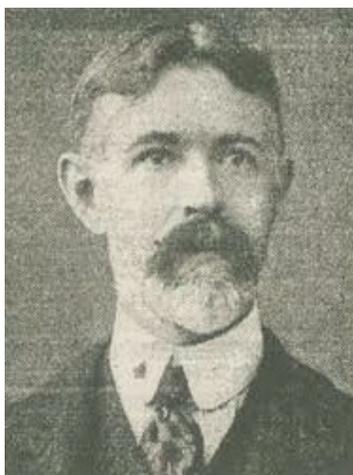


Renee Harris (1876-1969)
Credit: Pittsburgh Press

A poker game was scheduled for Sunday afternoon, April 14. Henry and Renee left for their cabin to dress when the bugle sounded the call for dinner. (Every meal was announced with a bugle call.) Making their way below on the grand staircase, Renee fell and fractured her elbow. After treatment, her elegant evening dress was adorned with a cast in a sling, and she was in considerable discomfort.

After dinner on Sunday, husbands withdrew to the smoking room to end the day with cigars, cards and drinks. Brereton, Homer and Romaine arrived, and not finding any opportunities, whiled away the time playing cards. Romaine resumed his scouting duties and went out on the Promenade deck. There, he encountered Howard Case, a representative of the Vacuum Oil Company. The two struck up a lengthy conversation, but with the temperature dropping, they headed to the smoking room bar to continue their exchange and have some highballs. With the trap set, Romaine introduced Case to Brereton and Homer. With friendly dialogue and drinks, the relaxed atmosphere, the elegant room, and the low, soothing rhythm of Titanic's engines, the card dealing began. Walter Clark was among those who headed to the smoking room in search of a card game. Clark suffered from alcoholism and was inebriated. The gamblers invited Clark to their game, counting their lucky stars in getting an impaired mark. Sitting nearby and alone, Canadian

Spencer Silverstone, buyer for a large department store, was thumbing through a new novel, "The Virginian," and casually observing the card players. Glancing at the clock, he noted 11:40 pm and returned to his book. Just then, a faint tremor from far below coursed through the smoking room. It was just enough to get people's attention and cause them to speculate on what had happened.



Howard Case (1864-1912)
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica



William M. Clark (1884-1912)
Credit: Find a Grave

LUCK of the DRAW

Silverstone and a few others rushed out on deck in time to see the iceberg, illuminated by the ship's lights, vanish into the dark astern. Titanic seemed unharmed, and soon the engines began turning again, slow to half for a few minutes. But then they shut down for good as Titanic drifted to a stop. The delay caused little concern, and Howard Case commented, "...it will give us more time for bridge." But Walter Clark's wife was anxious and arrived from their cabin to get her husband. The two went below to dress warmly. Harry Homer (using his middle name Haven as his alias) was playing cards with six others when the collision occurred. No one considered the grinding vibration a cause for concern. Brereton joked about Titanic sinking, and they resumed their game. But things were not as they should have been. Walking on deck wasn't quite right, and passengers noted a barely perceptible list to starboard, with the ship slightly down by the bow. Although no one mentioned the strange conditions, a knowing look conveyed something was amiss. Within 10 minutes, steam, building up in the boilers with the engines stopped, lifted the boiler safeties and released the pressure up the funnel pipes with a roar that compounded the growing unease.

Orders were given to uncover the lifeboats and for passengers to don lifejackets. The smoking room steward, who had left a few minutes earlier, returned to announce that the ship had had a serious accident and announced, "They are lowering away the boats for women and children." He then added, "You had better get on deck." Considering their next move, the three hustlers decided to have a look for themselves, leaving some winnings on the table. They did not see their marks, Howard Case and Walter Clark, again. Reaching the open deck, the sharps were struck by the blazing stars and by the band playing lively ragtime tunes inside the main staircase to calm the passengers as steam thundered out of the funnels. Unsure what to do next, the three gamblers watched the first lifeboats being loaded with women and children, although many showed great reluctance to be lowered in a boat to the dark sea. Some men were allowed in the boats when women and children refused to get in and boats were sent away half full.

Watching to see how things developed, Homer commented that they were safer on the ship than on Broadway. But as time went on, a place in a lifeboat looked more and more appealing. Wanting further evidence of the ship's condition, they went below. Coming across firemen leaving the boiler rooms, they got the information they needed; Titanic was severely damaged and sinking. Returning to the boat deck, the three saw that male passengers were no longer being allowed in the boats. Witnessing heartrending family separations in the growing tragedy, Homer saw the drama of Ida and Isidor Straus: Isidor wouldn't enter a boat before other men, and Ida would not leave Isidor. Homer watched the elderly couple walk aft. Suddenly, the three gamblers heard pistol shots from forward on the portside, fired by Fifth Officer Herbert Lowe to prevent a rush of men into a boat he was loading with women and children. Eager to escape, Brereton saw a boat being lowered to the sea and thought it might work if he waited for another boat to reach A deck (the deck below the boat deck) and have a go at leaping into the boat. His two confederates latched on to the idea, and they encountered several stokers with the same intentions.

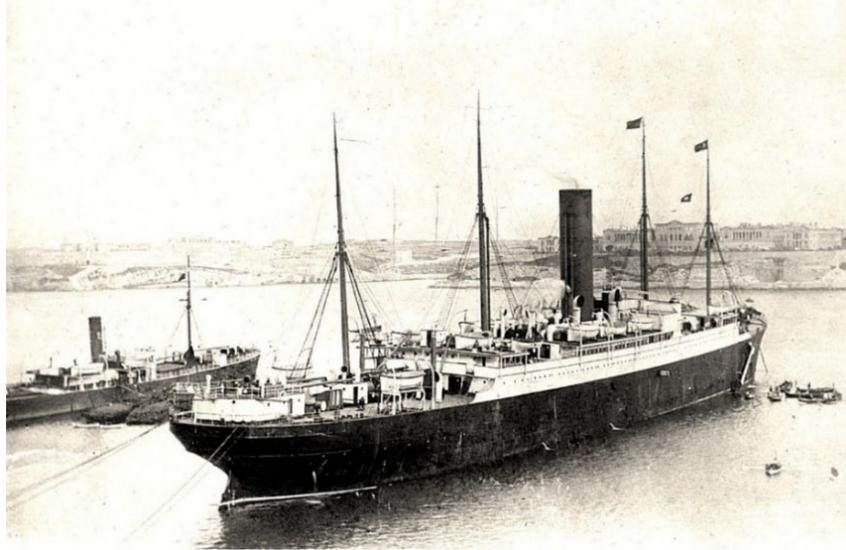
Boat 15 was the furthest aft on the starboard side. Steerage steward John Hart led a mixed group of 25 people, including three children, to boat 15; then he did it again. About 40 minutes before Titanic sank, boat 15 was partially loaded at the boat deck, then lowered to A deck where five women, three children and one man with a child entered the boat. A number of stokers were already in the boat, now crowded with about 70 people. With the boat ready to lower away, First Officer William McMaster Murdoch asked Hart who he was. He replied, "One of the crew. I have just brought these people up." Murdoch told him to get in the boat and take care of them. Waiting for his chance on the rail, Brereton stepped aboard, with Homer and Romaine right behind him. Brereton, not concerned with manly appearances, later said, "There wasn't anybody to tell me to get out, and I doubt very much that I would have paid much attention to such an order." When they reached the water, the falls couldn't be released, and they were stuck as boat 13 descended on top of them. The falls were cut, and boat 15 was hurriedly rowed away.

As they departed the ship's side, they took in the full picture of Titanic's sinking. She was entering her final convulsions, with the bow ever deeper, the stern rising, and those still on board gathered on the stern. All in boat 15 were hypnotized and dumbfounded by the scene. Brereton watched as people leaped from the stern into the ocean, "...like frogs jumping from a bank." The hull began to break up; the lights went out, and the stern, now vertical, picked up speed as it vanished into the Atlantic. Nothing was left, save floating debris and the agony and sounds of those in the frigid sea. Brereton claimed to be distraught at being unable to assist. Eventually, "the cries, like an easing pain, ceased." Harry Homer was later quoted by a New York newspaper, "Several persons died in the lifeboats from exposure and dropped into the sea before the Carpathia was sighted. The condition of scores of survivors was terrible. Many suffered from fright, exposure, and frozen feet."

Making good their escape, Homer, Brereton, and Romaine set about to help row the lifeboat and buck up sagging spirits. One of them declared that everyone would be saved, but after what they had just witnessed, this clearly was not true and just worsened feelings of despair. Like some of the other lifeboats, boat 15 made for the light of a steamer in the distance hoping to be rescued, but to no avail.

Under the command of Captain Arthur Rostron, Carpathia made an epic 58-mile dash through the night. With her engine room gang pressing the boilers beyond their normal working pressure, and skillfully avoiding icebergs, some only seen by reflected starlight, she exceeded her designed

speed while all hands kept a sharp lookout or prepared for the rescue. Arriving at Titanic's position as the morning sun made its appearance at 4 am, Carpathia picked her way through a sea strewn with icebergs, gathering up the dispersed lifeboats and 705 survivors. Boat 15, with the three gamblers, was retrieved at 7:30 am. The men scrambled up ladders and nets while women, children and the injured were hauled aloft in canvas bags. The last boat was recovered about 9 am. But before Carpathia turned for New York, four bodies (two who died aboard after being rescued) were buried at sea. Harry Homer was shocked and thought it inappropriate to have the service conducted in daylight with survivors present. When the service ended, Carpathia set her course for New York.



SS Carpathia in Halifax
Credit: Wikipedia

In addition to the survivors, Carpathia had 740 passengers of her own plus a crew of 325. Her public rooms were converted into dormitories, and First Class passengers were accommodated in cabins as much as possible. Carpathia's wireless set only had a range of about 150 miles (this varied with weather conditions), and although they could hear messages from Cape Race, the relay station in Newfoundland, the clarity of their own messages was questionable. Captain Rostron restricted wireless communication to official business, reporting survivors' names and dispatches to the White House and Cunard and White Star offices. He knew there would be an inquiry and carefully avoided transmitting direct information about Titanic.

Harold Cottam, Carpathia's wireless operator, and Harold Bride, Titanic's surviving wireless operator, sent wireless messages (Marconi-grams) from survivors to their families. The gamblers were no exception and, except for Romaine, who did not send a message, signed off their wireless requests using their aliases. Homer's wife received word, but Brereton's message may never have been transmitted given the crush of outgoing messages.

BACK to BUSINESS

Having saved their hides but little else, Brereton, Homer and Romaine set about to see what they could recoup on Carpathia. Setting up card games would have been unacceptable given the sorrow surrounding them, so they devised another scam.

They had not escaped scot-free, however. Safe on board Carpathia, they faced the scorn of resentful widows. Other male survivors did as well, but the three gamblers garnered special wrath.

Renee Harris, incorrectly housed with rescued steerage passengers (class distinctions still applied) was being escorted by two stewards to join First Class survivors when she saw the same gambler her husband pointed out during the card game on Titanic. She recoiled in horror; her rage left her speechless. When the sharper greeted her with, "Do not grieve. It is God's will," she turned on him with such fury that he avoided her for the rest of the passage. Another surviving passenger, May Futrelle, wife of author Jacques Futrelle, also was shocked to see one of the sharpers she had met on Titanic. Seated across from him at dinner, the sound of his voice and his smooth demeanor infuriated her. Insensitive to those in mourning with his loose talk of survival of the fittest, May Futrelle thought it better that her husband had died like a man than live like the coward in front of her.



Titanic survivors aboard Carpathia
Credit: Wikipedia

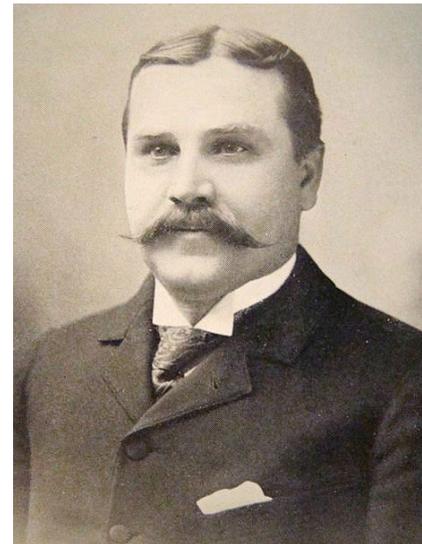
Various rumors grew about how the grifters went to see survivor Bruce Ismay, Chairman of White Star Line. They supposedly created a relief fund (in competition with the relief committee already established to care for the survivors) and asked Ismay to donate to the cause. Responding that White Star would compensate survivors, he shooed the trio away from his cabin. Another tale is that they collected donations and bought clothing to distribute to survivors. This story suggests that the gamblers changed their ways and provided succor for others rather than stashing items for themselves. Another suspicious story appeared in the May 1912 edition of the "British Witney Gazette." It was about two sharpers who escaped Titanic dressed as women. Bribing a steward to fetch women's clothing, they leapt into a boat dressed as women, then removed the fake garb and tossed it overboard. Apparently, no one thought less of them as they laid on the oars throughout the night.

Spencer Silverstone, who was reading "The Virginian" at the time of the collision, bumped into Charles Romaine, who described the aborted game that Silverstone had seen. Romaine revealed that he owed money to the other players and had lost \$1,200 that he had not retrieved from his cabin before abandoning Titanic. The grifter's tale of woe did not impress Silverstone. Perhaps he suspected the story was intended to lure him into a setup to get whatever money he might have in his pockets.

First Class passenger Charles E. Stengel, a Newark leather manufacturer who survived with his wife Annie but in different lifeboats, came across a dejected George Brereton. Wanting to help, Stengel stopped to talk and learned that Brereton had lost everything and had nothing to get home to Los Angeles. Stengel suggested compiling a list of his needs for White Star and to contact him for help if the company didn't come through. (Brereton's submitted losses of over \$4,200 for personal articles, including \$1,100 in cash.) Taking advantage of Stengel's kind nature, Brereton was laying the groundwork for a real estate and horse race betting con after Carpathia arrived. Brereton contacted Stengel about 2 weeks after Carpathia arrived, and Stengel invited him to dinner, whereby a future meeting was arranged. The real estate swindle grew from \$65,000 to \$100,000, and the obvious dishonesty of the horse betting scheme to predict winners angered Stengel. Growing indignant at the proposition, he became violent, and Brereton and his unidentified accomplice (posing as his brother-in-law) fled the meeting. On April 30, Stengel was called to testify at the US Senate hearings. He passed away from pneumonia 2 years later.



Spencer Silverstone (1876-1964)
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica



Charles Stengel (1857-1914)
Credit: Friends of Cedar Lawn

SALVATION

Not long before sunset on April 18, Carpathia arrived at the official finish line for transatlantic vessels, the Ambrose lightship. The utilitarian vessel, built in 1907, took station at the entrance of New York Harbor in December 1908. Ambrose was a new class of steel lightship that provided an accurate position for vessels entering the harbor. In the darkness, Carpathia made her way up-channel, through the Narrows and proceeded into the North River (the original name for the Hudson River). Swarmed by small vessels loaded with reporters, Rostron ordered that no one be allowed on board other than the pilot. The ship still had to go through quarantine and customs, and Rostron wanted no distractions. Protective of the survivors, he didn't want them disturbed by aggressive reporters. Still, the relentless newsmen shouted through megaphones and offered cash for anyone who would engage them. One reporter screamed that his sister was on board and offered \$100 to any crewman who would accommodate his brazen request.



Ambrose lightship
Credit: South Street Seaport Museum

Carpathia proceeded to the White Star berth at Pier 59 to discharge the 13 Titanic lifeboats. She then shifted to Cunard Pier 54, where thousands waited in the cold rain. Once she was secure alongside, passengers and crew were taken ashore to the Jane Hotel, completed in 1908 as a seamen's residence and conveniently located across the street from Pier 54. Other passengers found care at the Red Cross, the Traveler's Aid Society, and through neighborhood generosity. Those with injuries or medical conditions were sent to St. Vincent's Hospital.

Like many others, the three gamblers, using their aliases, were interviewed by reporters, their stories appearing in various newspapers. They polished their accounts to cover their tracks as sharpers and told of being in their cabins or playing an innocent card game (sans betting) or diverting attention with false claims of husbands being separated from wives at gunpoint. If the three were traumatized by the sinking, only Romaine made a comment about the tragedy, saying, "...we have gone through a great deal." One of the men's tales described jumping into the sea and getting hauled aboard a lifeboat. Homer claimed to have donned a lifebelt and made a raft of splintered wood and floated in the sea for hours before being picked up. Another sharper story was that they got in a lifeboat early on, when it was easy, with no mention of daring leaps into the sea. Romaine told a bizarre tale of a group of stokers who were stealing a lifeboat. He admonished them with, "Don't launch that boat, there are still women and children on board." He said that he nearly got into fisticuffs with the stokers, went down to a lower deck with his companions and got into the boat, hiding under the thwarts until they made their escape. At best, their stories were inconsistent, at worst, outlandish. One of the sharpers stated that many other New York grifters had been on board and had gone down with the ship, making out that he was the coward who had escaped. His fiction was to provide cover and deflect police investigations. For whatever reason, the sharpers in New York didn't take advantage of their associate's kindness. As the week wore on, the stories became more erratic, and eventually the three gamblers melted away, but not before Harry Homer gave admiring credit to Henry Harris, who quit the poker game and saved his wife by taking her to a lifeboat. Harris's body was never recovered.

THE HANDS of FATE

While Brereton and Romaine hung around New York, Homer headed west, possibly to San Antonio. Eventually, all three resumed their criminal activities to varying degrees.

George Brereton stayed in New York and in August 1912 wed Grace Heron (b. 1887 in Idaho). Six years later, the couple had a son, George Daniel. Brereton's horse racing scheme caught up with him when he and several partners, including Harry Homer, shilled two farmers. The authorities had a list of Brereton's aliases and soon tracked him down. In 1915, he was convicted and heavily fined; he spent 21 months in jail. While incarcerated, his mother passed away. After his release, Brereton registered for the draft using an alias, George Arthur Bell. His son died while having his tonsils removed 1921, and his wife was so distraught, she committed suicide the following year. Not long before her death, Brereton started a relationship with Hazel Rell, a Wisconsin native born in 1895. Rell was with Grace when she killed herself, and foul play was suspected, but nothing was ever proven.

Brereton and Rell married, had a son and moved to Los Angeles, where Brereton was listed as secretary then CEO of a finance company. Brereton and Rell traveled extensively across the Atlantic in the latter part of the 1920s and into the 1930s on the premier ships. Eventually, their marriage failed, and in 1938 Hazel took her son, Daniel, to Oakland, California and quickly remarried. By the 1940s, Brereton claimed to be in the mining business, but age had not tempered his shilling ways, and he was at it again with his horse racing scam. Part of another gang, he and an accomplice cheated retiree J. T. Taylor out of \$27,000. Taylor spent a year tracking them down and charged the pair. Brereton and his partner each put up \$30,000 to avoid jail. In July 1942, Brereton, age 68, died by his own hand in the house he had shared with his first wife, Grace. He was buried in Valhalla Memorial Park Cemetery, North Hollywood, California. At the time of his death, he was listed as an automobile salesman.

Harry Homer, traumatized from the disaster, informed his sister, Louise Logsdon, that he was traveling west, then returning to their hometown of Kingstown, Indiana. He said little about Titanic other than that he was in the water before being picked up. Despite his brush with death, Homer kept to his swindling ways and in 1914 found himself in the federal penitentiary in Georgia, fined \$2,000 and responsible for court costs; the charge was cheating the same two farmers that landed George Brereton in jail. His wiretapping schemes brought in some big money, but in 1915, he and his second wife, Marie Hanscom (b. 1883, the daughter of a banker) scammed a fruit dealer, using a beautiful blond to entrap him. Homer and his wife landed in jail. After their release, they snagged a British Army officer (in the US to appeal to Congress for war funding) with the help of two other men, English Jim and Rothbart. Homer bought a ticket to get out of town and managed to beat the rap for lack of evidence. Joining a gang of grifters that worked Texas and Oklahoma, Homer used his sister's surname and wound up being arrested on a swindle. In the 1920s and 1930s, he and his wife kept on the move, somewhere between Ohio and California, skirting the law by using aliases. It was during this time that Marie passed away. Homer, on the run, found himself in Florida and returned to the liners of the North Atlantic to put some distance between himself and the law. He bounced between Britain, Cuba, France, England and Belgium. He eventually returned to the US and settled for a while in Ohio. He returned to New York sometime in the 1930s and died in 1939 in Manhattan at the age of 67.

Charles H. Romaine used his alias, C. H. Mr. Romcue, when interviewed by the "Chicago Daily Journal" a day after arriving aboard Carpathia. He stated that Titanic had been crunching through ice all day and that while he was having a highball, "The boat tilted so sharply that my highball slipped from the table. Then came the cry, 'we're sinking,' and the lights grew dimmer and dimmer and finally went out." He described no panic but told of a rush to the boats while officers ordered women and children first. A few years later, Romaine moved to London and became the managing director of a trust company. He then resumed running the Doxey Hotel in Anderson, Indiana, returning to New York in 1920. Romaine put his sharper days behind him and lived with his wife, Eileen, in Manhattan. At this time, he was promoting oil stocks to garner investors and raise capital. On a stormy night in January 1922, while crossing the street a block from his home, Romaine was struck and killed by a speeding cab. The cab driver was charged and imprisoned. Romaine was only 55 years old. Eileen never remarried and in 1970 was laid to rest in Maplewood Cemetery in Anderson next to her husband. She was 95 years old.

While on board Titanic, businessman Charles M. Hays spoke with National Guard Colonel and writer Archibald Gracie IV (1858-1912) and Civil War veteran Edward Crosby (1842-1912) about the ever-increasing size of transatlantic liners. Although impressed by Titanic, Hays took a dim view of the increasing competition among steamship companies to have the largest vessel afloat, noting, "The White Star, the Cunard, the Hamburg-American Lines are devoting their ingenuity in vying with one another to attain the supremacy in luxurious ships and in making speed records. The time will come soon when this will be checked by some appalling disaster." His comment was prescient. Hays had faith that Titanic would weather the collision and stay afloat for at least 10 hours but realized he needed to get his family, or at least his wife and daughter, into a lifeboat. His son-in-law and secretary stayed aboard. The three perished, as did Edward Crosby. The mortuary ship, Minia, sent out with three other vessels to retrieve the dead, recovered Hays's body on April 26. He was identified by his pocket watch and papers he held and was buried in the Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal. Throughout the evacuation, Gracie had helped load and lower the boats with Second Officer Charles Lightoller (the most senior officer to survive). He was rescued after spending the rest of the night on overturned collapsible B, but compromised by diabetes, he succumbed to lingering complications of hypothermia. He fell into a coma on December 2, 1912, dying 2 days later. While he was slipping into death, his last words reportedly were, "We must get them into the boats. We must get them into the boats." (He had started writing a book about Titanic and was obsessed with the subject.)



Archibald Gracie IV
Credit: Wikipedia

When Renee Harris left Carpathia at Cunard Pier 54, she told those who greeted her, "I have come back alone." Now a widow, she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and was unable to function for months. Renee sued White Star for 1 million dollars, but there was little to show for it. The loss of her husband, Henry, famous on Broadway, led many to speculate what would become of the production company and renowned Hudson Theater he owned. Renee knew the best way to keep her husband's memory alive was to keep producing plays and maintaining the theater. She took a partner, Anne Nicols, to help manage the company, and the two were named top female producers in 1922. A prolific producer, Renee, presented nearly a dozen plays a season. She used her talent and position to tackle hush-hush societal issues. "Damaged Goods," produced in 1913, addressed misconceptions surrounding venereal disease and the public health system. The next year, she tackled the taboo subject of sex trafficking with "The Lure." Both plays were nearly shut down by censors but saved by last-minute editing. She treated the characters (and actors) in her plays with civility and respect and expected no less in return.

A female producer was something of an oddity, and Renee received heavy criticism from the theatrical publication "Variety" and newspaper gossip columnist Walter Winchell. Renee turned down a substantial offer to buy the Hudson Theater. When the Depression clobbered Broadway and performances evaporated, the Hudson Theater, heavily mortgaged, went out of business. But Renee kept at it, taking on controversial subjects. She scouted new talent, including Ruby Stevens (Barbara Stanwyck). Although interviewed by Walter Lord for his book, "A Night to Remember," Renee was unable to watch the 1958 film. She married three more times, but all ended in divorce. "If I had my life to live over, I wouldn't change it. I had 10 wonderful, happy, superb, unforgettable years with my first husband. He spoiled me for any other man in the world," she said. A constant, generous donor to the Actors Fund, Renee received support in her later years in the form of subsidized housing on Manhattan's west side for those in the performing arts. She was 93 when she died and was laid to rest in the Ferncliff Cemetery in New York.

EPILOGUE

By the mid-20th century, the heyday of the seagoing sharper had ended. After nearly a century, times were changing, and steamship lines were starting to provide wholesome, family shipboard entertainment: movies, larger swimming pools, organized dancing, bingo, simulated horse racing (horse figures on stands moved by bellboys), solo crew instrumentals, relay races, dance marathons, funny hat contests, amateur variety shows, costume balls and even outdoor tennis on big liners like Normandie and Queen Mary. On British ships, the finale included the Star Spangled Banner and God Save the Queen/King. Time-honored shuffleboard, estimating the ship's daily mileage and the anchor pool remained part of shipboard amusements. The advent of large airliners provided a minor comeback of sorts for gamblers, but the marks were limited to those headed for Las Vegas. Also, airliners didn't offer enough enchantment, and gambling at 40,000 feet never got a foothold.

The industry changed after WW2 and cruise lines hired social directors, then specialty cruise directors to organize ever more sophisticated onboard entertainment. Eventually, casinos were introduced, with slot machines, gambling tables and the usual bells and whistles to entice passengers to engage in games of chance.



Casino aboard a cruise ship 2009
Credit: Captain-tucker/Wikimedia Commons

Casinos are usually shut down when the ship is in port, although certain countries offer exemptions. Generally, the ship has to be outside the 12-mile limit for gambling to commence, same as in the day of the confidence man. Other than illegal gambling, crime on board transatlantic liners was rare and consisted mostly of passengers sneaking forbidden items through customs. Perhaps the expanse of ocean made potential villains think twice.

Gamblers were charming, dignified and rapacious. Capable of engaging in intelligent conversation and with a dash of mystery, the boatmen of Titanic's day were primed to adjust their stories to suit any scenario. The magic of culling decks and dealing winning or losing hands were skills that were grudgingly admired. An equally skilled and seductive female partner expanded the possibilities to entrap the mark. In contrast to White Star's staid and boring warning against being a victim, the shipboard gambler offered excitement that some found irresistible. Some confidence men became legends in their own time, illicit to be sure, but hard earned.

*Although Brereton marked "Millwakee" Charles Hays's name on the passenger list to identify him as a desired mark, there is no surviving witness accounts indicating that the two ever played cards.

** The names Romine/Romaine and Secrist/Seacrist vary according to sources. It is not known when Charles Hallace Romaine dropped Harrison Secrist as his name.

Author's Note: Source accounts differ in details regarding persons, associates, locations, travel routes, etc. and some latitude was given to combine the various accounts.

Sources: Wikipedia; Encyclopedia Titanica; Reddit; Tim Maltin, Author; Daily Mail; Fandom; Truth Network; Commonplace; Golf Teachers Association; Lee Asher (playing cards); Titanic Boat Train Heritage Trust; How to play Red Dog (You Tube); Find a Grave; Titanic Archive; Fate Deals a Hand by George Behe; Toronto Railway Historical Association; A Night to Remember & The Night Lives On by Walter Lord; Chicago Daily Journal; Titanic Belfast; Churchtown Pipe Band, Athy, County, Kildare; The Session (Irish music); Indianapolis Star; British & Senate Inquiries; The Silent Sod; The New York Tribune; The Whitney Gazette; Chicago Daily News; Tramps & Ladies by James Bisset; New York Times; Daily Echo; Wellington Advertiser; Titanic Universe; Geni; City of Melville; Mason County Press;

Cover sheet illustration by Polish painter Feliks Pęczarski (1804-1862)